

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO INSTITUTE OF POLITICS & CNN PRESENT

# THE AXE FILES

## The Axe Files - Ep. 193: Kathleen Sebelius

*Released November 22, 2017*

**Axelrod:** [00:00:00] Just jump right in. Kathleen Sebelius it's great to see you. And great to have you at the Institute of Politics you've been a wonderful presence around here.

**Sebelius:** [00:00:11] Well it's been an amazing experience. I didn't know what to expect and it has exceeded my expectations.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:18] I told you that it was going to be

**Sebelius:** [00:00:19] I know I know but it's been a lot of fun.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:22] So no one probably around here has as deep a relationship with politics as you did. You grew up with it all around you.

**Sebelius:** [00:00:35] I did.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:36] Tell me about your folks.

**Sebelius:** [00:00:39] Well it actually starts with my grandfather who would have been probably the most successful politician in the family not my father's father but my mother's father who was beloved and was elected judge in Cincinnati.

**Axelrod:** [00:00:55] You're from Cincinnati Ohio.

**Sebelius:** [00:00:57] Both my parents born in Cincinnati. Three of my grandparents were born in Cincinnati.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:01] I saw somewhere that your great grandmother worked as a maid for for William Howard Taft before he became president.

**Sebelius:** [00:01:09] She did she and her sister Bridget and Mary Hanigan came from Ireland were put on a boat at 15 and 17 by their parents and ended up in Cincinnati. We're not quite sure how that happened.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:24] Yeah how does that happened?

**Sebelius:** [00:01:25] Well not quite sure but the census in those days recorded family members who lived in the house and then they recorded the servants who also lived in the house. And there were my grandmother and her sister in the home of William Howard Taft before he became president. And 100 years later my father ran against the grandson of the president.

**Axelrod:** [00:01:51] Right and lost.

**Sebelius:** [00:01:52] And lost. But it was kind of a great tale of America that the grandson of the maid and the grandson of the president were actually contesting each other in a race for the United States Congress and they both were incumbent congressmen at the time.

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**Axelrod:** [00:02:06] So your your mom's father

**Sebelius:** [00:02:09] My mom's father was just a very popular politician looked out for folks but my grandmother hated politics so he stayed as a judge a beloved judge and lawyer. My father

**Axelrod:** [00:02:23] Which is a tradition I mean Taft was a was a judge and that was his sort of springboard.

**Sebelius:** [00:02:29] We don't follow the Taft family.

**Axelrod:** [00:02:30] No I understand. I'm not I'm not trying to impune the Gilligans or the Dixons.

**Sebelius:** [00:02:33] The Dixons. Thats right. That's right. But my dad was the son of a successful businessman. My grandfather and his father before him ran Catholic funeral homes. Very popular. They were doing very well. My grandfather was on the board of Procter and Gamble. He was on the board of Kroger's which is a Cincinnati company. He his oldest son he hoped would follow in his footsteps as a businessman and a city leader. And my dad surprised his father by saying first he didn't want to be in business at all he wanted to be a teacher and secondly he thought he would run for elected office much to the shock of my grandfather.

**Axelrod:** [00:03:22] Like a lot of political figures from that era he also served in the war.

**Sebelius:** [00:03:27] He did he as he used to say he went from you know his nice perch in the University of Notre Dame. When the campus recruiters came across campuses in those days and said to the senior class if you agreed to go to officer training school you could accelerate your graduation to January rather than May which he did and he was on the deck of a destroyer about six weeks later and I said to him later why did you choose the Navy? He said well we had a sailboat in Michigan and I thought I'd be on the water. But yes he served he served in the Navy and then came home and had married my mother.

**Axelrod:** [00:04:10] And they met as kids or?

**Sebelius:** [00:04:10] Well they went to the same school. They kind of knew the families of each other. They didn't really date though as kids and somewhere in the college years they got to know each other again and ended up married to one another and the rest is history.

**Axelrod:** [00:04:33] And tell me about your dad. I mean I was aware of him when he was governor of Ohio and as we've spoken before in the early 70s was touted as a potential future presidential candidate but there were several steps along the way before he got to that point.

**Sebelius:** [00:04:49] There were. He ran for city council when I was five. And at that point that there wasn't even a Democratic Party in the city of Cincinnati so he had to run as what was called the charter right which was sort of the break away from there were the Republicans and everybody else. And he ended up much to everyone's surprise including his being successful. The only newcomer elected and I think that began his career as an outsider and a rebel.

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**Axelrod:** [00:05:20] I'm curious do you remember that? I mean do you I'm sure you remember some of his later campaigns I'm I'm wondering how far back your memory of politics goes.

**Sebelius:** [00:05:29] Well I remember I'm not sure I remember the first city council campaign. I remember shortly after that he was very involved in trying to put together a Democratic Party so there were people who would come to the house and talk about party building which was kind of laughable because there wasn't a party at all. He had been inspired by Adley Stevenson. He'd heard Adley Stevenson speak and said I I'm a Democrat. I want to go volunteer for the Democratic party only to find out that there wasn't a Democratic Party. So he put together a Democratic Party first in Cincinnati and then began to grow the party always involved in social justice issues he'd been educated by Jesuits he felt very strongly that Cincinnati was still tied too much to the slavery days of the South. And he was involved with a lot of ministers and a lot of people in the community around breaking apart the racial barriers in Cincinnati which made him pretty much of an outsider in in the town where he had grown up. I remember my mother talking about attending a wedding at one point. At this point he'd probably been on city council for a couple of terms and he was always the voice that was saying we shouldn't be doing this we should be doing that. And she talked about going to this wedding with people they had all grown up with at the Hyde Park country club which my grandfather had helped to found. And people were so angry at my father that no one would sit with her at the table. My dad had gone to the bar with some friends and came back to find her all by herself. And it just made her mad. I mean she just said these people are wrong you know and it was kind of shocking to them that it was that deep and that personal. But he believed very much in social justice. He was an early anti-war believer. He got elected to serve several terms on city council and got elected to Congress in 1964.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:29] And then got redistricted and that was the race against Taft.

**Sebelius:** [00:07:33] That was the race against Taft. Bob Taft had a seat that was an at large seat. My father had the seat in Cincinnati that hadn't been Democratic since I think the Civil War and in the Johnson landslide he won and Bob Taft won and then Ohio in the redistricting lost the At-Large seat. So they both ended up in the same congressional district in 1966.

**Axelrod:** [00:07:58] And then he ran in 68 for the Senate.

**Sebelius:** [00:08:02] He did.

**Axelrod:** [00:08:04] And was that an anti-war candidacy? Because he challenged an incumbent Democrat.

**Sebelius:** [00:08:08] Well there was a so-called Democrat named Frank Lausche who was a very popular Ohioan.

**Axelrod:** [00:08:16] Lighten up it's like 45 years ago.

**Sebelius:** [00:08:18] I'm just telling you Frank Lausche he had served twice as governor two terms as governor and I think he was in his second or third term in the United States Senate. He was anti-union. He was an I mean he was he he basically was the polar opposite of my father in terms of beliefs on social issues. And that's why he was very very popular as a Democrat. He

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held the seat and my father felt very strongly that he should be challenged in a primary. Everybody thought he was totally crazy but people had told him that for years and years and years. And as he said I think they did an early poll and the polling showed that he had 8 percent of the vote. And Lausche had 92 percent and he said we're in. You know its a go.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:12] Thats all I need to see.

**Sebelius:** [00:09:15] That's absolutely true.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:16] But he won the primary.

**Sebelius:** [00:09:18] He won. He won. And it was it I think shook the political establishment.

**Axelrod:** [00:09:22] Did you work on the campaign?

**Sebelius:** [00:09:23] I did. I remember that campaign very well and he very much was involved with the anti-war group when he had been in Congress in 64. I gather it was in 1965 when Lyndon Johnson decided that one of the ways to gather support for the war effort was to ask all the Democrats who had won who were veterans to go to Vietnam and there was a large contingent of people including my dad who spent 10 days in Vietnam and I remember that trip very well and I remember him coming back. My brother is 15 months older than I am and I have a brother 360 days younger than me. They both were one was a senior in high school and one was a sophomore in high school. I was a junior. And he came home and said you absolutely cannot go to Vietnam. I will do anything I can to make sure that this never happens. There is something very wrong here. We're being lied to. This war is wrong. And he about half of the contingent who went to Vietnam became the initial signers of the bombing halt in Vietnam so it had a negative effect that wasn't what President Johnson intended. But my father very much was a significant war opponent from that moment on and part of it was inspired by his two sons who he just felt would be cannon fodder and it would be a terrible mistake.

**Axelrod:** [00:10:57] So he won the primary but he didn't win the general election.

**Sebelius:** [00:11:01] He narrowly lost. And this was a very bizarre race. I mean it's a thousand years ago. But a guy named Bill Saxby who actually wanted to be governor was the sacrificial lamb in the race because nobody was going to beat Frank Lausche. So they teed up a guy and basically said if you run the Republicans said to him that if you run in this race then we will all support you in the governor's race down the road two years later. But we need somebody to run against Lausche and it's you. My dad who actually wanted to be governor ended up to the surprise of everyone winning the Senate race.

**Axelrod:** [00:11:39] You know it's funny I want to get back to you but you just jogged my memory you know in 1948 Adley Stevenson really wanted to run for governor for senator for senator and Paul Douglas who was a reform city council member in Chicago wanted to run for governor and the Democratic organization feared Douglas as governor because he knew where all the bodies were buried.

**Sebelius:** [00:12:05] Right.

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**Axelrod:** [00:12:06] And Stevenson was a foreign policy guy so they ran Stevenson for Governor Douglas for the Senate. And each went off and served with distinction in those jobs. I don't think Saxby served with distinction.

**Sebelius:** [00:12:20] Well he ended up being the attorney general of the United States as you remember. He was a brief senator but he won that race. And you talk about 48. One of the thing I remember going to the convention of 68 with my father who was at that point the

**Axelrod:** [00:12:36] Here in Chicago.

**Sebelius:** [00:12:37] Here in Chicago. We got into Chicago and it was clear that there was going to be real trouble. And my dad called my brothers who were coming to join us and said you you may not come to Chicago. You have to stay out of this city. But the peace fight was under way and they a number of them including my father had drafted the peace plan to try and put in the Democratic platform and went to see Hubert Humphrey and had a conversation with Hubert Humphrey about the need to have a distinction between the Democrats and the Republicans and the distinction should be that the Democrats needed to stand up against the war in Vietnam and Humphrey said I don't think this is a good idea. Lyndon Johnson the ghost of Lyndon Johnson was hovering and he I think was afraid. So my dad reminded him that in 1948 Hubert Humphrey as the mayor of Minneapolis had led the delegation to go visit Harry Truman and say you need a civil rights plank. Truman said it's a bad idea. We will lose the Southern Democrats. And Humphrey said you don't you don't have to do anything. The votes are here to do it. You get out of the way. But you need to distinguish yourself from Dewey and the Democrats have to stand for civil rights. And my father reminded him of that conversation 20 years later and said this was you. You know what this looks like. We have the votes on the floor of the house. We have the votes to put the peace plank in. This will elect you president of the United States. This is the right thing to do. And Humphrey could never do it.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:16] Yeah but I can see those qualities in your father that would cause him to be shunned by its tough to be the conscience.

**Sebelius:** [00:14:24] Oh Yeah. It is. And he had a great Irish wit and he couldn't quite filter what he said on a regular basis. It was good lessons for me. I learned something about winning and losing and I decided I never wanted to lose. It's painful.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:46] Yes. Winning is better than losing.

**Sebelius:** [00:14:48] It is it is. Don't compromise. I mean I learned about a moral compass.

**Axelrod:** [00:14:54] Yeah losing without principle well winning without principle is worse than losing.

**Sebelius:** [00:14:59] That's much worse than losing.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:01] Well he lost with principle in 1968. What happened in that general election? I mean why did he lose?

**Sebelius:** [00:15:11] Oh well he

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**Axelrod:** [00:15:14] Lausche never endorsed him.

**Sebelius:** [00:15:16] Oh no. God no. I think it was just an election where I mean it was a narrow loss. Ohio still wasn't quite there. There were people who were angry at him for taking out Lausche. It was a tumultuous time and I mean it wasn't a landslide of any kind and Humphrey was losing. So when you have the presidential ticket going down it's very hard if you're running as a Democrat in Ohio to pull it out. Humphrey was mad at him also the whole time so he didn't have a lot of national support and the national ticket was going to lose to Nixon.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:51] And then he came back two years later.

**Sebelius:** [00:15:54] He ran a lot of races.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:56] He apparently could not take no for an answer.

**Sebelius:** [00:15:58] That's right.

**Axelrod:** [00:15:59] And ran for governor two years later.

**Sebelius:** [00:16:01] Ran for governor and as my brother famously said which was the quote in The Cincinnati Enquirer when somebody said to John well why is your dad running for governor he said because he's run for everything else. And he needs an office. But he was successful.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:16] I'm sure your dad loved to read that quote in the newspaper.

**Sebelius:** [00:16:17] Yeah it was great.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:22] And he as governor he was a historic figure in that he implemented the first income tax in Ohio.

**Sebelius:** [00:16:32] He did which again made him wildly popular. But Ohio was one of the richest states in the country and about 47th to 50th in every service. Schools were crumbling. They had no mental health services at all. They had no environmental protection in fact the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland famously caught on fire a couple of times.

**Axelrod:** [00:16:57] No Randy Newman wrote a song about that.

**Sebelius:** [00:16:59] Yeah declared a fire hazard. I mean that was real there was so much oil and gas on the top of it you could not it was against the law to light a cigarette anywhere near the banks of the Cuyahoga because it would burn. And he just felt that an income tax was a missing piece of the Ohio economy and not only did they pass it in the legislature. He first of all campaigned on it. I mean imagine in this day and age someone campaigning for office saying I'm going to install an income tax. He had it passed through the legislature which was a battle but they did it. But then the legislature in their infinite courage decided they would give themselves an out and put it on the ballot. So he had to run another statewide campaign a year after he'd been elected governor. And Ohioans voted 60 40 for an income tax.

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**Axelrod:** [00:17:54] That's amazing.

**Sebelius:** [00:17:55] It was pretty amazing. You know in Illinois at that very same time there was a Republican governor Dick Ogilvy who implemented an income tax and met the same fate that your dad did when he ran for re-election lost to an anti tax Democrat Dan Walker. So so your dad I recall because I started as a very very political writer still in college in 1973 but I was watching the national scene among other things. And your dad was highly highly touted in fact Peter Hart was his pollster.

**Sebelius:** [00:18:36] Mark Shields was his campaign manager. That was when Mark was doing and that's how Peter and Mark met they met in 68 when Bobby Kennedy was killed they both showed up in Ohio about a week apart when my dad was running for the Senate and said we both need a candidate and it's you. And they worked on that campaign together and then Mark came back to run the gubernatorial campaign.

**Axelrod:** [00:18:58] Peter still rhapsodizes about your dad. I mean he talks about him in such glowing terms and said he was like he was for me the model of what a politician should be.

**Sebelius:** [00:19:11] Well he was a man who was I think driven by all the right reasons. He wanted to get things done. He was very impatient clearly running all these races. It wasn't to be in office it was to do some good.

**Axelrod:** [00:19:25] Important distinction.

**Sebelius:** [00:19:26] He he never lost sight though of social justice issues and racial equality and income inequality. He felt that being in government was a great way to try and balance the economy. And he took some very unpopular positions. But then felt as as his educator background taught him to do that you went out and educated people about why you were doing what you were doing and if you explained it well enough if people understood why we needed a tax what a difference it would make in their lives then they would respond.

**Axelrod:** [00:20:03] He didn't educate quite enough of them in 1974. It was a it was actually a Democratic year.

**Sebelius:** [00:20:10] A huge Democratic yeah.

**Axelrod:** [00:20:12] And he lost by 11000 votes.

**Sebelius:** [00:20:15] He lost by a tenth of a percentage point. They didn't call the election for three days. And in fact at midnight on election night the former governor Jim Rhodes who ran against him came back for a second two year two term stint. Jim Rhodes conceded at midnight. And at that point we knew because we were looking at the numbers coming in that he had the percentage he needed out of northeastern Ohio which was a Democratic stronghold but he didn't have the turnout so that while he was getting you know 65 percent of the vote the vote numbers were down enough that it was going to be very close.

**Axelrod:** [00:20:58] So let me ask you about you in all of this. You I know you were were you through college at that point?

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**Sebelius:** [00:21:07] I graduated from college in 70 when he got elected the first time.

**Axelrod:** [00:21:10] Let's just take a short break and we'll be right back with Kathleen Sebelius.

**Axelrod:** [00:21:33] So in Irish political families of that era there was a tradition and that tradition was that the oldest son would be become the politician. That was the Kennedy tradition here. Rich Daley. And that's just the way it was. There weren't a whole lot of stories about the daughters going into politics. What what did you did you know as a as a child that you know someday I kind of like to do this? And did your parents encourage you to think about that?

**Sebelius:** [00:22:09] Well I never really saw myself as a candidate but I knew politics was something that I loved. I actually got to be the girl in the room. So I I adored my dad and I would sit in on meetings and I would hang out at these gatherings which mostly were men. And I learned a lot. I heard a lot. I saw a lot of activity along the way. And at some point along the way I did actually figure out that my mother who was amazing wonderful strong tenacious supportive she really had the lousy side of the bargain. I mean she had four kids in this household and this often absent husband. And he got to stand up in front of big crowds and they would clap their hands and write checks and get him to go to dinners and I thought OK if I if I have to be one of them I want to be him. You know that looks pretty fun. But I really didn't ever think I'd be the candidate. I just thought I would be involved in politics. When I married my husband who I met him while I went to college.

**Axelrod:** [00:23:21] Who was also from a political family.

**Sebelius:** [00:23:23] He is he is. His father was in the state Senate and then in Congress.

**Axelrod:** [00:23:28] In Kansas.

**Sebelius:** [00:23:28] In Kansas as a Republican. So we have a mixed marriage. But Gary was always far more liberal than his dad.

**Axelrod:** [00:23:35] Did you did you were there things about which you commiserated you and Gary about being in political families?

**Sebelius:** [00:23:44] Well actually we we had some very funny early conversations because I knew his father was in congress. He had no idea who my father was. And so I tried to commiserate with him only to find out later

**Axelrod:** [00:23:54] My engineer Zane points out that we didn't expressly say your dad was Jack Gilligan.

**Sebelius:** [00:24:03] Jack Gilligan from Ohio. Yes. So Gary thought initially that I was just making these very strange comments and why would I talk about his father being in Congress because he had no idea we had that in common. What we later learned which became very important to both of us was that the family approach to politics was wildly different. Partially through the mothers. Gary's mother hated politics and she talked about Keith being gone and leaving and being absent. And that became a very difficult part of her life. My mother was the

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ultimate cheerleader and supporter how important the work he's doing how we can get involved. My dad wanted us all to know what he was doing. And you know politics is really tangible as a kid. I kind of knew where he went to work. I could watch it in the newspaper. I could figure out what he was most of my friends had no idea what their fathers were doing. They'd walk out the door disappear be gone. We'd do class trips to city council. People could watch my dad. Now they would say to me all the time my father would never vote for your father.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:14] One of the differences though is that but for those two years in Congress your dad's service was largely in Ohio.

**Sebelius:** [00:25:22] When I was a child it was all. Yeah.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:24] In Cincinnati.

**Sebelius:** [00:25:26] Yeah. And it was very tangible. I mean I knew exactly what he did. We were taught about it in school. We could follow it in the newspapers.

**Axelrod:** [00:25:35] But Gary's dad was in Washington. Did they stay in Washington or?

**Sebelius:** [00:25:39] No. Gary's dad so Gary grew up in the very northwest corner of the state. His dad was in the state Senate for 12 years which meant he left on a Sunday night and he would come back on a Friday night and then go to town hall meetings. So he was gone during the week when Gary was in grade school and high school and then he went to Washington and they moved to Washington. But his mom basically kept a home front in Kansas.

**Axelrod:** [00:26:07] And that's tough.

**Sebelius:** [00:26:08] It was it was very tough. But so we had very different approaches and Gary was really not very enthusiastic when I finally said maybe I should run for a state legislative seat. He was terrified that I would leave and I would be gone and we really had to walk through that I was not his father I was more my father. I was really not doing this to leave the family it was to really become connected. And in Kansas the legislature was a part time job. And I could actually be home. My kids were two and five. I lived in the capital city. It was actually a much more family friendly job than what I had been doing. So I kind of ran for the legislature to stay home.

**Axelrod:** [00:26:50] You know it's interesting you say that. When Barack Obama was thinking about running for president one of the appeals of it was that he could actually live full time with his family because he had been a legislator.

**Sebelius:** [00:27:01] And he'd been a distant legislator. His family lived in Chicago and he had to go to Springfield.

**Axelrod:** [00:27:05] He was in Springfield. And then when he was in the senate they stayed in Chicago. And he missed them.

**Sebelius:** [00:27:11] And that was that was the life Gary had which was very different than what I had done because my dad didn't I mean he was only in Congress as you say briefly but also I

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was in college and so were my brothers by the time he went so it wasn't like we had an absent dad.

**Axelrod:** [00:27:29] Yeah. Yeah. So you had a stint you spent time as a lobbyist before you ran for public office.

**Sebelius:** [00:27:37] I did.

**Axelrod:** [00:27:38] And what would tell me about that you know that has a very negative connotation these days.

**Sebelius:** [00:27:45] I actually I learned a lot. I ran the trial lawyers association and I in that capacity testified in the legislature and organized their legislative activity. But I also you know there's a lot of similarities between trial lawyers and politicians I think where you make the best case you can you put your evidence forward you win or lose and you you move on. There's a certainty to the argument there's a social justice mission. The trial lawyers that I knew were representing people who were suing big corporations and banks often consumers who had been harmed and they were bringing a case where if they lost they didn't get paid. If they won they took a portion of the settlement. But this is a group of lawyers who say you know we're in this with you because if you lose the case we we lose also. We're not going to charge you by the hour. We're not going to believe you if we don't prevail.

**Axelrod:** [00:28:47] We've heard this I mean there are all kinds of debates

**Sebelius:** [00:28:53] It was a good lesson for me.

**Axelrod:** [00:28:55] that trial lawyers can be a great progressive force. They're not charity cases.

**Sebelius:** [00:29:00] They're not charity cases but for me it was a also a risk taking association that I felt I could argue on a lot of time for the good guys. And it also taught me a lot about the legislative process and I knew I liked it and I knew I could do it. But I was working 60 hours a week and traveling all over the country. My kids were little and my husband was a trial lawyer so the wheels were coming off the wagon and running for the legislature in a seat that was 10 minutes from the Capitol was really a great part time job.

**Axelrod:** [00:29:36] When you went to legislature how many women were there? This was in the mid 90s.

**Sebelius:** [00:29:41] It was in the mid 90s.

**Axelrod:** [00:29:44] No it was the mid 80s. The mid 80s to the mid 90s.

**Sebelius:** [00:29:45] 86. I think there were about 20 women total in the house in the Senate out of 165. When I lobbied I was the third woman paid to be a lobbyist. There were the League of Women Voters a woman who was about 155 years old who represented the truckers Association and me. So it was a very male dominated place. There had been a few more people by the time I got elected to office.

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**Axelrod:** [00:30:15] I'm intrigued that the 155 year old woman was representing the truckers.

**Axelrod:** [00:30:19] She was. Mother trucker was what she was known as. She was mother trucker. She was paid.

**Axelrod:** [00:30:27] I should ask you about the issue du jour because you know we know you turn on the news and it's basically an episode of men behaving badly. What was what was your experience like as a as a young female legislator and as a lobbyist for that matter?

**Sebelius:** [00:30:51] Well as a lobbyist as a legislator as a woman before that who worked for the corrections department and was the first woman in the central office I would say that the the atmosphere what breaks my heart is to know that here we are 40 years later and very much the same atmosphere prevails and it's about power it's never been about sex it's all about power and men who have power over women use that power and all kinds of ways. And you know I had certainly my share of a variety of horrific situations bosses people. I was though protected in that I didn't ever desperately need this job. I could walk out at any minute I could walk away at any minute. There are so many women who can't do that who need to feed their families who need to be quiet because they are desperate for the work that they have and that that needs to be blown up. And I guess the only thing that gives me some comfort in hearing the stories come forward is maybe maybe now this atmosphere can finally change and some light can be shown on what has been miserable behavior by a small cadre of men but fortunately they're men who achieve powerful positions and they can take advantage of a lot of people.

**Axelrod:** [00:32:27] And we should point out men this is not a partisan defect.

**Sebelius:** [00:32:32] Not at all.

**Axelrod:** [00:32:34] We've seen bad behavior on both parts. I find myself kind of questioning whether I was as assiduous about calling out that behavior.

**Sebelius:** [00:32:50] Well I think part of it I mean that's a that's a really good call we need some men also I think to absolutely stand up to their friends and colleagues I mean it's the same thing as having racial slurs joked about in a locker room it's the same thing you know people need to be called out and say that's not acceptable we're not going to do that anymore it's over.

**Axelrod:** [00:33:11] You know I was arguing with a friend who said how can you how can people have voted for Donald Trump after that access hollywood tape? And I had to be honest and I said look I voted for Bill Clinton twice. And I think he was a really fine president a brilliant guy committed public servant. But I knew I mean everyone in politics knew about his behavior and we looked the other way. And I think there's a lot of soul searching to be done.

**Sebelius:** [00:33:43] You bet. And that shouldn't happen ever again. Not only did people look the other way but they went after the women who came forward and accused him. And so it doubled down on not only bad behavior but abusive behavior. And then people attack the victims. And you can watch that same pattern repeat. And it it needs to end. It needs to be over.

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**Axelrod:** [00:34:10] Let me ask you a delicate question is that was that fair criticism of Hillary that she participated in that effort?

**Sebelius:** [00:34:17] Absolutely. I think it's it's very fair. And I you know the same criticism would be made today. Now was impeachment the right vehicle?

**Axelrod:** [00:34:27] Right its a different question. But it does come up today like how do you? Now we see the Al Franken situation. And you know all of it is bad. The question is is all of it equal?

**Sebelius:** [00:34:42] Well and I think I mean Franken has done something different than some of the other males involved. He first of all admitted behavior and apologized but immediately asked for an ethics investigation on himself. And I think that we'll see I mean the ethics committee frankly has not had a great record. They have settled a lot of cases.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:10] 17 million dollars.

**Sebelius:** [00:35:10] Behind closed doors.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:12] I don't think that you can do that anymore.

**Sebelius:** [00:35:15] I don't think you can do that and I think that Franken is likely to do some real soul searching in the meantime. But he he stepped forward immediately and did it. Most of the others who have been accused have have followed a very different path and it's a path that looks a lot more like what Bill Clinton did.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:32] Let me ask you returning to your career you ran for insurance commissioner in Kansas a statewide job that was generally held by

**Sebelius:** [00:35:42] Not generally. It had never been held by a Democrat in the history of the state.

**Axelrod:** [00:35:46] But also by people who were sort of in that insurance commission office and so on and you were a not only a Democrat but a politician running for that office. What made you decide to run for that office?

**Sebelius:** [00:35:59] It actually was probably the craziest race I've ever done in my life. Because not only had the office never been held by a Democrat but nobody knew what went on in the office. I mean I literally had no idea because I'd never known anybody who worked in the office.

**Axelrod:** [00:36:18] So you said I have no idea what goes on in that office so I'm going to run and find out?

**Sebelius:** [00:36:21] Correct. Something like that. So the Clinton administration had failed to pass comprehensive health reform. I was a legislator I was on the health committee. I worked on health issues. I really thought something in the insurance commissioner's office has to have something to do with health. You know people have health insurance right? It has to have a

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connection. And I also felt there was a possibility you could make a real consumer case. What I knew about the office is that the incumbent who I was going to run against and all of his predecessors took all of their campaign cash from the companies they regulated. And I thought there's something here that people need to know about. It was legal in Kansas. There was no law against it. I tried as a legislator to pass a law to say you shouldn't be allowed to do that but decided that there might be a consumer. So the third thing that made a difference was that the incumbent had a couple of scandals as did his predecessor. And there was like an opening. So that if we could raise some money we could teach people what the office using my father's old lessons if people understood what the office could be I could describe it anyway I wanted because I figured if I didn't know what the hell it did nobody knew what the hell it did but you know to describe it as it should be a consumer office not a company office I should work for you not for them.

**Axelrod:** [00:37:54] It makes eminent sense to people.

**Sebelius:** [00:37:57] And it actually worked.

**Axelrod:** [00:37:59] How much did you win that race by?

**Axelrod:** [00:38:04] I think they won it by like 52 53 percent against an incumbent in a year 1994 was a bad democratic year. We lost the governor's office. We lost the two sitting Democratic congressmen we had we lost about 15 seats in the legislature and I was walking around saying woohoo. I won.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:26] That's an amazing feat actually. And one of the things the thing I think that you're most remembered for in that office is they set they approve rates.

**Sebelius:** [00:38:39] Correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:40] And they approve acquisitions of insurance. And you stepped in to prevent Anthem from buying Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield.

**Sebelius:** [00:38:54] That's right.

**Axelrod:** [00:38:56] And tell me about that? Why'd you do that?

**Sebelius:** [00:38:59] Well the Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield company had a majority of the marketplace. Most Kansans got their insurance through Blue Cross Blue Shield. And actually it was always known as a well-run company. It had great relationships in the state. At that point the company the acquiring company wasn't called Anthem it was WellPoint and they have since renamed themselves as Anthem. And they were acquiring Blue Cross plans across the country. Kansas would have been their ninth state. But in most other instances the Blue Cross plans were going bankrupt and Anthem WellPoint came in and kind of rescued them and was seen as rescuer. Our company was solvent and doing very well. And I had this very instinctive reaction that this would not be good. It would sever the relationships that were pretty personal the board all were Kansans and the providers knew the relationship and that we'd suddenly become part of this national conglomerate that wouldn't be good. But the company made I think a fundamental mistake which is that they argued that Kansas Blue Cross coming into this big

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family would have economies of scale would be able to lower administrative costs and deliver better services and it would be happy days for everybody. The reason they made a fundamental mistake is the math didn't work. The administrative overhead of the big conglomerate company was running at about 10 percent. Kansas Blue Cross was running at about 5 percent overhead and you couldn't make that argument that somehow we would be financially better. And they promised their shareholders that they'd make a lot of money on the deal. So ultimately the shareholders approved it. The company Board of Directors approved it. I was the last step in the process and supposed to just check the box and say everything's fine.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:04] And you didn't check the box.

**Sebelius:** [00:41:05] I blocked it and then was sued by WellPoint and we prevailed.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:12] And the state Supreme Court. And that sort of propelled you into the governor's race in 2003 2002.

**Sebelius:** [00:41:17] It did. I turned around. And what happened nationally is the next seven Blue Cross Blue Shield plans which were looked at for acquisition blocked the takeover and stayed state based plans which I think was also good for those states.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:37] We're going to take another short break and we'll be right back with Kathleen Sebelius. So you ran for governor in 2002 and you you won a substantial victory.

**Sebelius:** [00:41:48] I did.

**Axelrod:** [00:41:49] And with that came the right to or the opportunity to deal with an intractably resistant Republican legislature. Did you ever tell Barack Obama you know I feel your pain?

**Sebelius:** [00:42:06] Well the difference between state legislatures and Congress is that states operate with a different set of rules. You have to pass a budget. There is no deficit spending. The legislature ends at a specific date begins at a specific date and you actually have to get something done. So at the end of the day even if you are working with a majority from the other party there often is some kind of pathway to move forward. And I I was really shocked when I got to the national scene to realize that for most members of Congress if they never did anything that was fine. They really didn't care. Not having a budget. No big deal. Not having any legislation passed. Fine. That that attitude is impossible at the state level.

**Axelrod:** [00:43:02] I think that was also for Obama a kind of a revelation when he got to the Senate because he'd been the legislature and been able to work these bipartisan deals to pass major pieces of legislation and it was much harder.

**Sebelius:** [00:43:16] Yeah it may not be exactly what you want but you definitely can move the ball down the road. I inherited a school finance challenge that had been floating around Kansas for nine years. And actually the litigants had had let it lay dormant during the Republican governor's tenure because they figured that with a Republican governor who wasn't eager to put a lot more money in schools and with the Republican legislature bringing it back to a court decision wouldn't help. But we we dealt with that. And you know in a year and a half of lots of

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struggles and back and forth through the court we we had a major new school finance plan that was passed that equalized funding throughout Kansas and made a huge step forward.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:01] The other thing that the other issue that was a persistent issue in your governorship was abortion and you vetoed a series of fairly strict anti-abortion laws. You were told by your bishop in Kansas down there not to take communion.

**Sebelius:** [00:44:27] That's right.

**Axelrod:** [00:44:28] And and how painful was that experience?

**Axelrod:** [00:44:36] Well I mean the whole thing is still a bit baffling to me having been raised and educated in Catholic schools during my entire educational process. I am I'm a cultural Catholic. I'm a cradle Catholic. And I have lived my life as a Catholic. I believe in the church teachings. I have baptized my children and we are married in the church. We what I don't believe in and I think John Kennedy said it best when he spoke to the Baptist ministers is that I would impose my religious views on a whole group of constituents who don't share those religious views. I believe there is a separation between church and state that you know church doctrine should be taught in the churches not in the polls. So we had this intrinsic tension. And I think the Catholic Church is somewhat split on this about whether or not a Catholic who is elected to office has a duty to impose that religious teaching which somewhat sounds like Sharia law on those who don't believe it or do you actually you know operate as a church member yourself and then look at the laws of the land.

**Axelrod:** [00:46:06] Why is Kansas sort of the fulcrum of this debate. I mean Dr. George Tiller

**Sebelius:** [00:46:11] That's why.

**Axelrod:** [00:46:11] Who was an ally of yours but also ran a women's health clinic where abortions were performed was murdered.

**Sebelius:** [00:46:23] He was and we had what was the so-called Operation of Mercy Summer where a number of the most vocal right to life groups came and spent the entire summer in Wichita protesting Dr. Tiller but also rallying people around this cause. And I you know I tried to follow the recommendations of doctors in large part who felt that the safety and health of women was paramount and some of the standards being proposed some of the operations

**Axelrod:** [00:47:04] A lot of debate about late term abortion.

**Sebelius:** [00:47:07] But there were very few of those and they were for health reasons. And I just I mean I feel very strongly that again it's become a debate that has less to do with health and welfare of children and families and much more to do about you know a political wedge issue and again making it very difficult mostly for poor women or women who can't take time off work or women I mean women with means will find ways that they can balance their families and plan their own families and take care of health situations and do things. Women without means if you close a clinic that is near their house or work if you put a 24 hour waiting period and make them take three days off work if you require three visits instead of one none of which have any medical significance they all are delay and time and process you put that woman in a

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very jeopardized situation. And that's really what a lot of these laws were about I felt. The interesting thing David was all the bishops and some of the priests are very active and vocal in this issue. The nuns are a thousand percent on the other side. And as far as I'm concerned in the Catholic Church the nuns do the work they run the hospitals they teach the schools they minister to the poor. There are bad seven times as many nuns as priests. And anywhere I would go in the state every time the archbishop would sort of call me out out loud I would get 15 calls from nuns around the state of Kansas saying you hang in there girl you're doing just the right thing do not bat an eye we pay no attention to him neither should you. They were pretty ferocious.

**Axelrod:** [00:49:02] I have to ask you about your tenure as HHS secretary under President Obama and particularly where we are today on the Affordable Care Act. You were there during that fight. You were responsible for executing and administering the Affordable Care Act. What what has been accomplished and where are we today?

**Sebelius:** [00:49:32] Well I think that as significant as my father's brief tenure in Congress was when Medicare and Medicaid were passed in 1965 and he sat on the drafting committees and helped to put those laws into effect the passage of the Affordable Care Act is another huge chapter in this path toward universal health coverage which I think is more torturous in America than any country on earth but we made another giant step. I think the conversation in some ways has changed forever. And the notion that people actually in 2017 are talking about things like it is unacceptable for insurance companies to ever lock somebody out of a policy because of a preexisting health condition that was not part of anybody's conversation in 2008. It wasn't a fact known by most people or cared about. I think that there is much more support throughout the country republicans and Democrats red states and blue states that health care really is a right and everyone should have access to it. They may have different feelings about how to get there. But those fundamental building blocks are part of the legacy that I don't think will ever go away.

**Axelrod:** [00:51:02] So the that is in that that is the sort of 20000 foot

**Axelrod:** [00:51:08] Correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:51:08] and we know 20 million or more people

**Sebelius:** [00:51:11] 20 million and we have the lowest uninsured right we've ever had in the country.

**Axelrod:** [00:51:15] That said a lot of those people are on Medicaid and a lot of the discussion has been about these health care exchanges and premiums going up in some states you know and seemingly serious ways.

**Sebelius:** [00:51:34] Well the irony is Democrats have now become Republicans in some of this debate in that what really works in the insurance market is competition. I believe in markets and markets need competition. That used to be the Republican mantra. It has become the Democratic mantra. And having regulated an insurance market you can actually regulate a market with competition. You can't if it's a monopoly market they can charge whatever they want. So driving companies out which the Republicans have systematically tried to do and are

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still doing in this administration raises rates. It is the surest way to make sure people pay maximum dollars. They are systematically undercutting again another fundamental principle of insurance which is that you need some balance you need some people who are sick and some people are healthy and they need to actually pay in because nobody can choose and pick when they get a bad diagnosis or get hit by a car.

**Axelrod:** [00:52:42] And that's one of the challenges because the number of healthy younger people who've signed up hasn't matched at least the hope when this began in 2014.

**Sebelius:** [00:52:56] I think that's right although every economist who I have read and talked to about the end of 2016 if you look at that year felt that rate adjustments were going to be one time that the markets were actually stabilizing. Finally companies had a three year trend rate. They knew who was coming in they knew what to do to go after people who weren't coming in and they were really projecting a very optimistic

**Axelrod:** [00:53:27] Before the new administration.

**Sebelius:** [00:53:29] Before the election.

**Axelrod:** [00:53:30] So tell me what what the president is you know obviously he's on a mission here to repeal the Affordable Care Act

**Sebelius:** [00:53:38] Correct.

**Axelrod:** [00:53:39] That has failed a couple of times. What administratively has HHS done and has the White House done to to undermine the program?

**Sebelius:** [00:53:51] Well actually the White House started at inaugural day because open enrollment of 2017 lasted 11 days into the new administration. And step one really was to pull down all the advertising before the end of 2017.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:05] To let people know that this was available and they should enroll.

**Sebelius:** [00:54:11] And that that deadline was coming and they should get out.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:14] And it had impact.

**Sebelius:** [00:54:14] It had people feel about a million folks who would have likely been insured given the trend rates of the previous three years.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:24] So people who are very sick found the program.

**Sebelius:** [00:54:27] Correct. They got in the door early.

**Axelrod:** [00:54:29] But those younger people who are needed weren't reached as readily as they could have been or should have been.

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**Sebelius:** [00:54:35] Well not only reached as readily but they made sure that they didn't know a deadline was coming and that they didn't warn them to you know hurry up and sign up. And young healthy people really need to be hit by two by four to say come on time is there. So that was step one. Step two is that the administration then systematically put out information that I would say was just blatantly false about the program using tax dollars and putting videos together. Then they went after the contracts for 2018 enrollment which we're in right this moment canceling the advertising that would tell people enrollment was under way cancelling the groups who were hired to help people on the ground actually walk through the process.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:23] And cutting the enrollment period in half.

**Sebelius:** [00:55:24] Cutting it in half. And then the president you and I both know that the president's voice had a huge impact on sign ups in previous years when it was Barack Obama. You could actually watch him give a talk go on Facebook put an ad in and watch the enrollment numbers rise with him. Donald Trump on the other hand has done everything he could to convince people that the law is gone.

**Axelrod:** [00:55:53] And yet in the first few days of the enrollment period this November twice as many people signed up as a year earlier.

**Sebelius:** [00:56:03] And you know we'll see how that ends up. I mean the end of an open enrollment is 2015 but it's clear that people still desperately want and need insurance coverage in spite of the fact that the premiums are up.

**Axelrod:** [00:56:16] Wait you said the end of the enrollment period is 2015?

**Sebelius:** [00:56:19] I'm sorry December

**Axelrod:** [00:56:20] December 15th yeah.

**Sebelius:** [00:56:22] December 15th. And you know in spite of the fact that premiums are up and that has been widely advertised most people who are in the marketplace have subsidies that also are elastic. So with the rise in premiums people's subsidies actually cover most of the cost and in fact it's estimated that about 60 percent of the people looking for coverage can find an insurance policy comprehensive insurance with a zero dollar premium.

**Axelrod:** [00:56:56] And yet they hear the president talk about canceling cost cost sharing subsidies.

**Sebelius:** [00:57:01] Canceling the subsidies and telling them that the program is dead it's gone it's been blown up it doesn't work. And I think that does have an impact. A lot of people think the law has been repealed.

**Axelrod:** [00:57:12] And so where do you see this all going? I know that Senators Alexander and Murray have a compromise to continue to fund these subsidies but it's sort of lingering here there may be some showdown around the budget in December but where in the long run do you see this going?

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**Sebelius:** [00:57:33] Well I'm pretty pragmatic about first you have to stop the bleeding. And I think it's very important that the Democrats take one of the chambers in the 2018 election. Its more likely to be the house given current polling. If that occurs at least they can stop legislation from being passed to do further damage. The law will not be repealed the law will not. But until the end of this current administration you will still have lots of administrative tools within the Office of Health and Human Services to undermine undercut put out bad information.

**Axelrod:** [00:58:16] Do you believe it will survive?

**Sebelius:** [00:58:16] I think it will if they cannot muster the votes to pass an actual repeal legislation. I think vestiges of this will absolutely survive. And frankly the target as far as I'm concerned which is Paul Ryan has made fairly clear speaker Paul Ryan is not really anything to do with the Affordable Care Act. It is the underlying Medicaid program which now insures about 72 million people. The largest insurance program in the country. That program that supports most of the vulnerable populations in this country.

**Axelrod:** [00:58:58] Including nursing homes.

**Sebelius:** [00:59:00] Absolutely. And it's also the largest amount of money from the federal government to the states of any program in existence.

**Axelrod:** [00:59:08] You you had an unhappy experience at the beginning of the Affordable Care Act with the rollout of the Website which became a famous kind of disaster.

**Sebelius:** [00:59:20] It was.

**Axelrod:** [00:59:21] And how I don't want to go through the the ins and outs of how it happened and contractors and all of that stuff. I just want to know what it was like for you as someone who's been committed on this so long I mean for so much of your life to suddenly be in the crosshairs for having not rolled this out the way it should have been rolled out?

**Sebelius:** [00:59:45] Well it was I think probably the most miserable eight weeks of my life. It seemed like eight years. But from the 1st of October until the first of December when we said we will have it fixed was a very very long painful process. First of all I had let down the president too I gave up my governor's job to come and work with

**Axelrod:** [01:00:12] For this reason I mean you were motivated by this health care dispute

**Axelrod:** [01:00:12] Yes it was his number on priority. Absolutely. Absolutely. Rhe opportunity to do this. I think there were people desperate for coverage who were frantic that maybe this wouldn't happen. If you recall on October 1st the adversaries felt so strongly that this law should never be allowed to start that they shut government down. The government was shut down for 13 days. Kind of lost in the shuffle of the tech disaster. And we I think the scariest thing for me is it first of all was something that I could not personally fix I can't write code I could not say to everybody get out of the way I can just do this. And I had to rely on many of the same people who had told me everything was going to be fine. That was pretty terrifying. Luckily we had a lot of new support coming in but the people who wrote the code had to actually fix the code. That was step one. And secondly I thought if we put this date down which I did when I went to

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congressional hearings and got my ears boxed on a regular basis and it doesn't work the second time we're toast. And maybe this law will never I mean we have to get this running to make sure the law actually fulfills its promise. The only silver lining in some of that was that nobody was going to get benefits until January 1st so the December date insured and it actually did work that we had a million people by the 1st of January who then had coverage in it so we weren't actually blocking people from coverage they could have had day one because it wasn't going to go into effect. But it was horrible and miserable.

**Axelrod:** [01:01:59] Before we go because it's a particular concern of mine you were a big champion of mental health parity

**Sebelius:** [01:02:08] Yes.

**Axelrod:** [01:02:09] Tell me tell me why and what is the state of play on on that today?

**Sebelius:** [01:02:16] Well I first of all have felt for a very long time that mental health should be treated like physical health ailments and not aside.

**Axelrod:** [01:02:26] Is this something? Did you have anything in your family or?

**Sebelius:** [01:02:29] I did I had some family members who had depression. I have had family members who suffered from alcoholism. I've had situations where people needed treatment and it was always a side bar program. I worked on mental health issues as a legislator. This has been I think a compelling my father put together a whole mental health system in the state of Ohio so as a child I saw the horrors of having hospitals where people were literally chained and locked and I mean and that wasn't terribly long ago. So we've moved some distance but in the Bush era the passage of the Paul Wellstone meant mental health parity legislation bipartisan signed by a Republican president and then the Affordable Care Act which said an essential health benefit has to be mental health and substance use disorder treatments

**Axelrod:** [01:03:27] Particularly important given the opioid crisis.

**Sebelius:** [01:03:27] Well it's it's a huge step forward. It brings things into the mainstream. I think what is really alarming is is those two laws are not fully implemented yet. It is not fully integrated. It is the law but we don't have enough providers. We don't still have full parity but we were on the pathway there. This administration again wants to take a huge step back. We have an attorney general who now talks about the opioid crisis and talks about it as a criminal justice issue not a major health crisis. The president has said it's a major health crisis but he supports legislation which would take people's coverage away to deal with that health crisis. You have people once again suggesting that we could do carve out programs and give states a pot of money and they could deal with it as opposed to saying every insurance policy every program every operation should cover this treatment and it's a mental I mean it's a chronic issue. And we have a third of our jail beds right now a third of our prison beds are filled with drug users not sellers not people who have committed drug users and that is not only incredibly ineffective it's incredibly expensive and stupid. We in Kansas passed a law that said if you're a drug user you go into a program your sentence stays behind you so if you screw up on the program you're going to go in we had fewer prisoners when I left the governor's office than when I came in. We

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actually shut down a couple of wards in areas because it is a chronic health disease not a criminal issue.

**Axelrod:** [01:05:20] Well I hope that you don't take I hope that it's not inappropriate for me to say that I'm sure that your dad who passed away a few years ago by the way who also ran for the school board in his late 70s.

**Sebelius:** [01:05:34] He did he left the governor's office and 25 years later he ran for the school board.

**Axelrod:** [01:05:38] In Cincinnati.

**Sebelius:** [01:05:38] And won!

**Axelrod:** [01:05:39] Which speaks to his character but he must have been terribly proud of the things that you've done. And I on behalf of people who need health care and on behalf of people who are struggling with mental health problems I want to thank you for your service.

**Sebelius:** [01:05:57] Thank you so much.

**Axelrod:** [01:05:58] And for being at the Institute of Politics.

**Sebelius:** [01:06:00] Well it was great to be here and one of the joys when I got elected governor was having my father there. And much to his surprise I wore the dress that had been made for my mother for his inauguration. That was a surprise and it was kind of a wonderful full circle.

**Axelrod:** [01:06:18] Kathleen Sebelius great to be with you.

**Sebelius:** [01:06:20] Great to be with you.